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Raising decent citizens – On respectability, parenthood and drawing boundaries

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Abstract

Parenthood is a normatively regulated category with distinctly loaded moral expectations about “good parenting”. These normative expectations are lived through the body in gendered, classed and ethnicized ways. We examine the ways in which parents representing majority and minority ethnic backgrounds construct an image of themselves as respectable parents; a construct that is intertwined with the idea of decent citizenship. The parents drew on middle-class, professional and familist discourses on assertive parenthood, characterized by close scrutiny of their children’s activities and friends, and the clear boundaries imposed on them together with democratic, dialogical relationships with them, as the preferred way of parenting. Describing one’s own parenthood as respectable included an implicit or explicit definition of “Others”, who were less respectable as parents in ways that carried gendered, ethnicized and classed meanings. The qualities required of “a respectable parent”, besides physical and material characteristics, were also connected with the idea of “inner fitness” in the form of the right kind of moral values.

Keywords: parenthood, social class, gender, ethnicity, morals, sport, citizenship

Introduction

Parenting is an emotionally significant part of everyday life for many women and men. At the same time, as a part of the institution of the family, it is a normatively regulated construct that shapes individuals’ opportunities to represent themselves as respectable citizens, and is closely tied up with the hierarchical differences of gender, class and ethnicity. In public debates in Finland, there is concern over whether or not present-day parents are capable of bringing up their children to become decent citizens. Among the topics debated are the health and physical activity of future citizens, which are also of interest from the point of view of national economies. This emphasis has brought

the role of leisure activities (see Kokko 2010) into discussions on parenting and upbringing. However, these discussions often lack an acknowledgment of the gendered, classed and ethnicized nature of the norms guiding “good family life”, and of the fact that parents are positioned in different ways, and therefore have different resources available for parenting (Lareau 2003; Gillies 2005; Reay et al. 2007; Vincent & Ball 2007).

In this article, we focus on the ways in which parents in the metropolitan area of Helsinki in Finland construct an image of themselves as respectable parents, and how “decent citizenship” as a future quality of their children takes shape as the stated objective of their parenting practices. Simultaneously, other parents and children are evaluated in relation to their ability to approach “decent citizenship”. We take the concept of respectability as an analytical tool in examining parents’ speech on “good” parenthood, drawing on the works of Skeggs (1997; 2004) and Gullestad (1984). We claim that, while conceptions of good parenting are largely shared, constructing one’s own parenthood and citizenship as good or respectable involves boundary-making that requires defining groups of Others as not good or not respectable. This boundary-making relates to gender, class and ethnicity; analyzing it consequently contributes to an understanding of how these categories intertwine to produce inequality in terms of whose lifestyle appears to be decent and good.

The formal attainment of many civil rights and civic duties, officially signifying full citizenship, occurs at the age of 18 in the Nordic countries. In this respect, those under 18 years of age are citizens-to-be and home, school and leisure activities are socialization environments training them for citizenship (Nivala 2006: 61). This artificial boundary reflects the common tendency to see children’s and young people’s citizenship as incomplete in comparison to that of adults.

Data and analysis

The data consist of two sets of interviews; one conducted in the context of organized leisure- time activity (Berg) and the other focusing on migration and family life (Peltola).¹ In all, we analyzed 30 (N=39) interviews with parents. The semi-structured thematic interviews covered the themes of family relations, parenting, upbringing, school, working life, leisure time, society, class, the family's economic situation, neighbourhood and the future.

Berg interviewed the parents (n=23, 13 female, 10 male) of children and young people (aged 0–17 years) engaged in organized sporting activities in eastern Helsinki during 2010–2011. The recruitment of interviewees was conducted amongst the parents of players from two football teams. In addition, one of the interviewees was a parent from a different football team, and two others were the parents of a child engaged in an individual sports activity, in order to increase the variety of the data. Most of the interviewees were of Finnish ethnicity; 15 of them defined themselves as middle class, “in the middle” or “average”, four as upper-middle class and four as working class.

Peltola's data consist of sixteen interviews (n=16, 10 female and 6 male), carried out in the metropolitan area of Helsinki in 2007 and 2009, with parents having an immigrant background, and with children aged 5 to 31. The parents were contacted through non-governmental organizations and via a parent-teacher meeting at a school. They were of diverse ethnic backgrounds and, while being differently positioned in racial hierarchies, they represented groups that are constructed as ethnic and cultural “Others” in Finland.² The descriptions of their lives in their country of origin referred to middle-class lifestyles, with two cases having an even more prestigious status, and only one parent coming from a poor family background. In Finland, their socio-economic positions were heterogeneous, but in most cases comparatively low. Four were unemployed, three studying and one retired. Those who were employed worked mostly in low-paid positions in the service sector; three held permanent positions corresponding with their highest educational achievement, and one was in a prestigious specialist position. Downward mobility after migration had affected most of them.³

The interviews were carried out with individuals (n=15), in pairs (n=10), and in small groups (n=5). Although these can be seen as producing different kinds of data (cf. Pietilä 2010), we consider this heterogeneity to be more enriching than problematic. A researcher cannot know beforehand what kind of data the interviews will produce, regardless of which methods are chosen. Our interviewees were members of the same family, so the subject matter – parenthood – was constructed in their everyday mutual interactions.

When approaching the data, we focused on materially and discursively produced social class, where discourses on parenting are a part of giving or denying moral value to groups and individuals (Skeggs 1997; 2004). Methodologically, our analysis is inspired by the idea of discursive material reading (e.g. Tolonen & Palmu 2007); that is to say, discourses, how they are utilized and the effects produced by them should be understood as being shaped by the material conditions – such as the socio-economic position and living conditions – of the speaker and the subject, and the power hierarchies created by these conditions. The position of a family thus has an effect on the construction of their leisure lifestyle, as the access to certain cultural choices requires time, knowledge and money.

The questions that guided the analysis are threefold: How is one's own (good) parenting described? What is the social location where the parenting takes place? What kinds of parenting are not considered to be good? Through these themes, we analyze the similarities in the discourses of parents in different social positions, as well as the points where differences brought about by class, gender and ethnicity are indicated. Quotations are used to illustrate typical discourses, and to validate and provide more detailed content for the concepts we have chosen to use.

Class, family and moral values

We approach parenthood as a socially regulated category, which carries classed, gendered and ethnicized meanings. Drawing on the work of Beverley Skeggs (1997; 2004), we see class as an ongoing process of classification which, in addition to socioeconomic factors, has to do with moral evaluations of individual and group lifestyles. Skeggs relies, as we do, on the Bourdieusian approach to conceptualizing social class, in which culture, lifestyle and the power to define the value of lifestyles and objects are crucial (e.g. Bourdieu 1984; 1989)⁴.

The starting point for our analysis is Skeggs' (2004) theorization of the body as a material and social surface in and through which different kinds of social and cultural categorizations are inscribed. The social differences of class, gender and ethnicity intersect and are embodied, but are also centrally moral categories (Skeggs 2004; Sayer 2005). From this starting point, it is possible to interpret lifestyles as being read as symbols of the moral state of an individual, the demands of the "right" kind of habitus thus materializing in the body of decent citizens (Berg 2010).

According to Bourdieu (1984, 169–172), habitus consists of socially learned forms of action, reaction and classification that appear "natural" to an individual. Being shaped in a social process, it is not only classed but also gendered and ethnicized (Skeggs 2004; Strandbu 2005; Thorpe 2009). Habitus is central to how gendered norms and inequalities become embodied (Skeggs 1997). Ethnicity and the cultural traits attached to it develop through social learning into a meaning-carrying, embodied and partly unreflected way of understanding oneself and others (cf. Strandbu 2005). Ethnic and racial hierarchies are produced by power relations, and shape the evaluations and expectations connected with the individual by their social surroundings. When stating that social differences are lived in certain bodies, we emphasize the habitual elements of class, gender and ethnicity, but also the expectations and categorizations that are attached to certain kinds of bodies from outside.

From society's point of view, the function of the family institution is to produce new citizens equipped with the right kind of capabilities. Decent citizenship has been related to the notion of civic virtue: to the ways in which a good citizen acts and thinks (Nivala 2006). In Finnish history, the moral education of children, carried out within families, was considered to be the basis for decent citizenship and the right kind of virtue, serving the building of the nation-state. Obeying the prevailing regulations was seen to merge with the individual's moral sense and consciousness (ibid.72–73, 81–82). The idea of virtue as the basis for decent citizenship relates to Skeggs' (1997: 1–3; 2004: 88) notion of respectability, which is a key mechanism through which some groups are othered, along with the hierarchies of class, gender and ethnicity. What is considered valued and respectable is defined in terms of power relations: respectability is seen as being possessed by white middle-class individuals, while the working-class “masses” are seen as lacking it, and therefore in need of external control (ibid.). For women in particular, respectability is connected with questions of mothering and sexual morals (Gullestad 1984; Skeggs 1997).

The family – defined first and foremost as the nuclear family in Western countries – is a (hetero)normative construct, and family relations need to be organized in a certain way in order to be accepted, otherwise they face the risk of being defined as “problematic”. Accepted, respectable ways of being a family are constructed in professional and media discourses in which the respectability of certain group or individual lifestyles is either confirmed or questioned. The ideals of “a normal family” draw on middle-class, white constructs of family life (Jokinen 2005; Yesilova 2009). In discourses of family life, the ideology of gender equality is present, for example, in the term “parenting”, referring equally to mothers and fathers. This gender-neutral rhetoric obscures the fact that mothers and fathers assume different responsibilities and encounter different expectations and sanctions within families and society. The term “parenting” carries implicit expectations of at least the mother being present, thus emphasizing the “natural” caring role of women (Jokinen 2005:

129; Yesilova 2009: 201). However, parenting is also seen as deficient and problematic if the father is not present (Vuori 2001, 362–363).

A child – their body and health – can be regarded as “a project” for the parents because the ideals and targets of upbringing reach out to the future. However, parents who are assumed to have failed to cultivate the right kind of characteristics in their child are at risk of being defined as irresponsible and not respectable in the present time (Kokkonen 2010). The problems of family life are located outside “ordinary families”: among the lower classes or ethnic minorities (Reay et al. 2007; Skeggs 2004). The moral evaluations of respectable parenthood are thus not only ways to describe the private sphere, but also a way to build and strengthen class, gender and ethnic divides (Skeggs 1997; Jokinen 2005).

The classed dimensions of parenting, such as the ways in which middle-class parents utilize their economic, cultural and social capital in order to provide their children with learning environments that optimize the accumulation of different forms of capital, have been widely analyzed (e.g. Gullestad 1984; Lareau 2003; Devine 2004; Reay et al. 2007; Vincent & Ball 2007; Stefansen & Aarseth 2011). The class-based resources transmitted by parents are connected with economic capital, which enables inherited cultural capital to be supplemented with expertise bought in from outside the family (Lareau 2003; Devine 2004; Vincent & Ball 2007). However, parents also wish to produce individuals who “realize their potential” (Stefansen & Aarseth 2011: 390), have “a sense of entitlement” (Lareau 2003) and “a proficiency in multiculturalist capital” (Devine 2004: 97–102; Reay et al. 2007: 1045) – namely, citizens equipped with certain moral abilities. Within the trend of health promotion, the importance of sport is emphasized. Yet, classed differences exist: higher socio-economic groups are overrepresented in children’s organized sports activities (Kantomaa et al. 2007), and the differences between these groups have become more marked during the past decade in Finland (Telama et al. 2009).

Respectable parenthood and children's leisure activities

When asked about what was important in bringing up children, the parents in both datasets, regardless of their position in class and gender hierarchies, emphasized remarkably similar values: they hoped their children would learn to respect other people, have good manners, and act in society in a constructive way, as shown in an interview with a group of fathers:

Father 1: The nuclear family is important, loving one's neighbour, all this kind of basic good, I would say. Respect each other, no stealing, no lying, no swearing, although that happens [...] That kind of good life, like, in every way. And I really want – which I know not all parents nowadays do, they don't care – I still want to establish that kind of sense of security that we exist and, accordingly, that they [children] have to, like, respect and appreciate their parents and siblings and friends, coaches, the people they meet.

Father 2: I have the same values, and also that they act with other people, as part of society.

Father 1: Make the children fulfil the requirements of society [laughter]. Yeah, but that's what it is.

Father 3: Accept differences and, like, these – if it's the colour [of the skin] or otherwise a different kind of face.

(Data 1, group interview, Father 1: higher education, management. Father 2: comprehensive school, service worker. Father 3: higher education, management.)

The “good life” that these parents wanted for their children consisted of having the right kind of values and acting in the right way in relation to society, towards other people and towards oneself as a bodily creature. In Berg's interviews, in which the context of the children's organized activities was evident, teaching a healthy lifestyle by means of sports activities was emphasized, although this theme was not absent from the other dataset either. The intertwining of bodily and moral qualities was visible, for example, in the parents' wish to get their children “to commit” to sports activities: they wanted their children not only to be present, but to learn to take care of the appropriate equipment, to obey and not to play around during training – in other words, to foster a certain kind of bodily habitus (Devine 2004; Mietola & Lappalainen 2005).

Thus, when seeking to equip their children for the future, the parents were not only interested in transmitting those forms of capital that may be turned into useful resources in the labour market –

which Lareau (2003) suggests as the rationale behind middle-class parents' parenting practices – but also regarded values such as respecting differences as a form of cultural capital (see Devine 2004; Reay et al. 2007). The wished-for qualities had a societal dimension: they made up what may be called “a decent citizen” – a term explicitly used by some interviewees. However, “decent citizenship” was never fully defined, but remained a vague concept, the content of which was expected to be generally known, or at least shared by the interviewer.

Forms of capital deemed useful in the labour market, such as formal education, were important as well, especially for those parents with an immigrant background. This emphasis may be explained in part by the different research contexts, but also by the middle-class backgrounds combined with the rather weak socio-economic positions of the families with an immigrant background within Finnish society, and the resulting wish for a “better life” for their children. Education was not only a tool for achieving one's own success, but a means to contribute to society and to be “a decent citizen”. In both datasets, the educated “decent citizen” had a body, and that body needed to be healthy and non-intoxicated, as revealed in an interview with a mother with a Kenyan background:

Mother: I hope, actually, that they'll get an education. To university level, to gain a profession in something. I hope, because they have the opportunity to study. I hope they'll be hard-working and have a goal to work towards. That's what I wish for them, [to become] good people in society. [...] I just hope they don't get involved in drinking, in alcohol, in drugs, in smoking ... well, smoking maybe once in a while, but not, like, something you have to do. So, like, be good citizens in society. And be somebody. Contribute something to society and also to their own lives.

(Data 2, individual interview, vocational upper-secondary level, student.)

Bringing up decent citizens like these demanded capabilities and resources that constructed what we refer to as respectable parenthood. In both datasets, and among parents in different class positions, a respectable parent was able to sustain authority as a parent; was present in the child's life, conversing, setting limits, giving reasons, closely monitoring the companions and activities of

the child and encouraging participation in constructive activities. Thus, close scrutiny, a conversational approach and the importance of constructive activities were emphasized – all of which have been found to be at the core of white, Western, middle-class parenting ideals (cf. Hoikkala 1993; Lareau 2003; Devine 2004; Vincent & Ball 2007; Stefansen & Aarseth 2011).

Organized activities were seen as supporting the attainment of the qualities of “decent citizens”, as they were seen to increase the children’s skills and knowledge in such areas as team games, a healthy lifestyle, self-discipline and organizational skills – thus, their importance lay in accumulating social and cultural capital (cf. Vincent & Ball 2007; Lareau 2003) and advancing the learning of the preferred habitus. They were also seen as positive because they were thought to prevent children and young people from drifting towards less constructive ways of spending their leisure time (cf. Hoikkala 1993; Devine 2004), as revealed in an interview with a mother with a Kurdish background:

Mother: It’s really good that the children have a hobby. [...] It seems, like, if they don’t have hobbies, they are on the internet all the time, or, nothing else. [...] If a child has a continuous hobby, he has a lot to do, he always knows the time, like, at five he’s got a training session, he needs to organize his own life. It’s really good that he always has something, so it’s not like he has nothing to do. Of course, then he may go somewhere with a friend, he likes it there, and he may... experiment with everything.

(Data 2, individual interview, vocational upper-level education, student.)

Ensuring that the values embedded within an activity were sufficiently compatible with the values held by the parents was also regarded as a task for a respectable parent. In Berg’s data, the parents notched up what practically amounted to a second working week catering to their child’s hobby, driving them to and from training sessions and matches, attending parents’ meetings, arranging tournaments and acting as assistant coaches. These tasks, however, were partly gendered so that assistant coaching was the task of the fathers only, while the mothers assisted more with practicalities such as laundry (see Jokinen 2005 on gendered housework).

The limitations of good parenthood

When asked about social class or social positions in general, the interviewees in both datasets understood these largely through economic and educational factors, yet they also acknowledged at least potential links with social and moral distinctions, lifestyle and questions of who socializes with whom. However, they did not take such categorizations for granted.

Parents of Finnish ethnicity often spontaneously mentioned that they socialized with different kinds of people: those of different nationalities, educational and occupational positions. They wished to present themselves as people who respected others regardless of their social positions, while simultaneously acknowledging that such differences mattered “to some people” and to society in general. In parallel, the choice of hobby for their children (football) was also morally justified, based on it being affordable for most people, and on differences supposedly being accepted within it (see Savage et al. 2001). The parents with an immigrant background interviewed by Peltola were keen to emphasize that they were well-integrated, decent citizens. They wanted to present their own family as “ordinary” and “normal”, as did the parents interviewed by Berg (ibid; Gullestad 1984).

Although the interviewees were reluctant to see social differences as defining a person’s worth, such differences nevertheless influenced both the opportunities and actions of the parents and the ways in which they evaluated others. Through their economic and cultural capital, the middle-class and upper-middle-class parents⁵ had more opportunities to offer their children activities which they saw as advancing the acquisition of social, cultural and physical capital (Lareau 2003; Gillies 2005; Vincent & Ball 2007). The less well-off parents in both datasets faced additional challenges in making these activities available to their children, and some of the more costly activities were out of reach altogether. In the next quote, a single mother with a Kurdish background describes the efforts she needs to make in order to pay for her children’s hobbies. At the

same time, her validation of the necessity for children to have hobbies on the grounds of mental needs, and professional guidelines on how much fresh air a child requires, shows how adept she is at drawing on the professional, middle-class discourses on parenting:

Mother: If I compare myself with some other single parent, a woman, she can go out once a week or twice a month, to eat, have fun, to have time for herself and all that. I don't have any of these things. I only, I go to work, sometimes I even work overtime, but not so much. [...] My children have many hobbies, however, which they need because they also have mental needs. Otherwise, they have to sit at home, at the computer, or ... how many hours a day ought they to walk? They should be outside many hours. It's a must that they go swimming, and to music lessons and so on. The social security office only pays for one hobby. I have to pay for the other one.

(Data 2, individual interview, Bachelor's degree from a polytechnic, lower-level employee with administrative occupation.)

Investing in hobbies, however, was not seen as unequivocally positive. Some middle-class parents critically distanced themselves from the ideal of multiple organized activities (cf. Lareau 2003), revealing the internal variation among people sharing a certain class position. A mother of Finnish ethnicity, who saw herself as upper-middle class, referred to investing in a large number of organized leisure activities for children, in her own circle of friends, as “programming” – a negative phenomenon that she connected with middle-class parenting.

Economic capital was not seen to guarantee respectable parenthood, as a feature of good parenting was that parents do not “outsource” their parenthood to organized activities, which was regarded as a risk for those parents with plenty of economic capital, but scarce resources for parenting in other respects. It was thus decidedly the moral qualities – not the economic means – that defined someone as respectable or not as a parent. However, life situations such as unemployment still jeopardized parents' ability to offer their children an optimal upbringing, even if they had the “right” moral qualities, as one father of Finnish ethnicity explains:

Father: For example, if a family is poor, they just don't have the money [Mother: For example the unemployed], yeah, and their child wants to take part [in a sports activity] but

there is no chance, so it [social class] does have an effect. And on the other hand, those who have lots of money, they can, like, force their child there, like to day care, like “our Matti is going to be an ice-hockey player”, even if the child says, “I don’t want to, I want to play the violin” or something else, and parents just say, “no, you are going to be an ice-hockey player” [*laughs*].

(Data 1, pair interview, comprehensive school, clerical and sales worker.)

In the interviews by Berg, single motherhood came up as another problematic category. A single mother was seen as lacking not only money but also other resources, such as time or energy; her control over her life was thus questionable, which easily becomes related to morals (see Gullestad 1984). In both datasets, the single parent role was always occupied by the mother. A Finnish mother describes a single mother she knows as follows:

Mother: The mother doesn’t have a computer and she doesn’t know how to use the internet and she is really, like, a single mum, and really tired. She works in a hospital and does heavy work, and in a way they have difficulties in keeping up when there are workouts – what items one should take along, at what time and where you have to be. This mother does not have the resources to participate properly. Those girls are still so young that they need someone to remind them about their packed lunch, and to wash their shorts and make sure that they have the right items with them. So, this girl is always a little bit uncertain. I’m afraid that she will drop out because things aren’t working out. The mother fights with the father about how much each pays for the shoes. [...] There is no encouragement. The mother can’t take part so much, like the time she was wondering about the acrobatics. She didn’t know, but I was very clear on the matter.

(Data 1, pair interview, higher education, upper-level employee.)

It seems that the caring role attached to mothers – which also plays a part in the higher statistical proportion of single mothers compared to single fathers – put them in a position in which their parenthood was more strictly controlled and prone to being called into question than that of fathers. Such gender-specific assumptions were emphasized even further when combined with other hierarchical differences. A mother with a Kenyan background explains that she feels her parenthood is under particular scrutiny, due to her position in two groups considered “at risk”, namely that of an immigrant and a single mother.

Mother: I don't know what they are expecting of a single parent. Like, [being] super-human beings. You, you get criticized. If the kids are not, like, well, they are brought up well, but...

I: Criticized by whom?

Mother: By friends, families, the environment, society. In the daycare centre. You have to do a little bit extra. Your kids must look healthy, they must look happy, they must look clean. Every day, and especially if you're a foreigner. Because, otherwise, people start criticizing here and there. [...] I want it to [be] clear that no one has anything to criticize when it comes to my kids.

(Data 2, individual interview, vocational upper-secondary level, student.)

The quality of her parenthood was read in the bodily appearance of her children (cf. Mietola & Lappalainen 2005), thus intensifying her need to make sure her children embodied "the inner fitness" of the healthy and disciplined image of a decent citizen (cf. Berg 2010).

Distinctions

Good parenthood was also construed by parents distinguishing themselves from those who were seen as failing to meet the criteria of good parenting discussed above (cf. Gullestad 1984). Although having respect for difference was one of the values that the parents expressed most frequently, in practice there were limitations on the types of difference that were accepted – by whom and from whom.

The parents interviewed by Berg emphasized that "certain matters" – the ingredients of good parenting – should originate at home. It was implicitly hinted that families deviating from the norms did not have the requisite "inner fitness" (see Berg 2010), which was linked to moral values and manifested in good manners, and hence their parenting was called into question. The evaluations of other families' moral worth were visible in the ways in which the parents stated that "not all families" shared the same values, and consequently did not bring up their children in the same way. On these occasions, the role of sports clubs as educators was highlighted. The fathers who were assisting with the boys' team reflected upon their role as follows:

Father 1: I would also say that we are able to influence them [boys in the team] a lot. And in some cases we even have to influence precisely the ones who maybe don't have this basic upbringing in place at home. We have to maybe teach them how one can or cannot speak.

Father 2: Yeah, one notices that while travelling, on trips and so on.

Father 1: Yes, and how to behave, taking hats off indoors and so on. All these kinds of basic things, we have to influence that as well. We had this incident with a ball, there were accusations that our boys had stolen a ball from the hall. So, we had to take on a role as educators on that occasion as well, make inquiries and question them. But, how can I put it, this was more necessary for certain [boys] than for others. We have a significant role to play because we spend so much time with them. I know that this may also include a father's role, as some boys don't necessarily have a relationship with their fathers at all, and so this kind of manly role comes out somehow.

(Data 1, group interview, Father 1: higher education, management. Father 2: comprehensive school, service worker.)

The implicit questioning of the values and abilities of “some parents” to bring up their children was intertwined not only with class but also with ethnicity and gender. In the above quote, it is assumed that a boy needs a respectable father figure in order to grow up to become a respectable citizen (cf. Vuori 2001, 362–363). Some of the girls' parents also referred to young female coaches as “role models”; however, this was not connected with “lost motherhood” but with respectability, a healthy lifestyle and femininity combined with physical prowess. This heteronormative role modelling has also been noted in the embodied context of physical education at school (Berg & Lahelma 2010).

When speaking about “the ball incident”, the father above omits the fact that it was the boys with an immigrant background who were suspected of stealing the ball. This was part of a more general tendency to treat the heterogeneous group of boys with immigrant backgrounds as a more or less coherent group, who were also sometimes more markedly under scrutiny than the other boys. The alleged lack of economic or cultural resources, implicitly connected with “the immigrant background”, was identified as “a problem”, and action resulting from it was regarded as justifiable. This also relates to the gendered stereotypes of racialized minorities, representing non-Western boys and men as threatening and therefore in need of external control (cf. Hautaniemi 2004, 182–183).

Another way to draw distinctions was to define the appropriate company for one's own child. The parents interviewed by Berg saw as an "undesirable friend" a child who had either the "wrong" rules at home or no rules at all. This allegedly manifested in undesirable behaviour, consisting of not having hobbies, hanging out at malls, swearing, smoking or drinking, lying or not having "manners" (see Lareau 2003: 145; Devine 2004: 96–101). An undesirable friend was a potential infector of Otherness, possibly changing the behaviour of their own child for the worse. Such an unfavourable bodily habitus was also connected with less respectable parenting, described through allegedly busy lifestyles and lack of care. The criticism was directed at the "wrong" kinds of lifestyle and values, embodied in the imaginary undesirable friend, from whom one's own child is both concretely and symbolically separated.

The parents with an immigrant background constructed their parenthood in relation to that of parents of Finnish ethnicity through two different logics, that of similarity and ordinariness, and that of distinction. Both of these may be read as answering the explicit and implicit questioning of their "respectable parenthood" (cf. Phoenix & Husain 2007). When emphasizing similarities, the children's ability to lead a life that resembled that of "an average youth" came up. A father with a Somali background describes his family as ordinary through his children's active participation in different hobbies – which follow the gendered pattern of preferred sports activities – and his own commitment in offering such activities. His simultaneous hinting that not all "immigrants" share this idea of the importance of children's activities may be read as at least partially distinguishing himself from this group:

Father: Our life is very ordinary and we get along well here in Finland. [...] My sons, they play football, and one of them is involved in taekwondo. And my daughter, she is involved in swimming. I am the one who usually takes them [to the hobbies]. For me, it takes quite a lot of time going back and forth to children's training sessions. Some immigrants wonder why I am always coming and going [*laughs*] to the sessions with the children.

(Data 2, individual interview, vocational upper-secondary education, distribution and service worker.)

Another discursive strategy was to distinguish one's own family from Finnish families. This was done by describing Finnish families as characterized by loose family ties, excessive freedom given to the children and a lack of parental authority, sometimes also referring to lifestyle and habits, especially the excessive consumption of alcohol. In this juxtaposition, their own families were defined as closely-knit, warm communities, characterized by mutual support and time spent together (cf. Espiritu 2001: 421–422). While it is not self-evident that characteristics such as “loose family ties” have classed meanings, these evaluations of lifestyles, especially regarding alcohol consumption, attached the construct of Other to Finnish parents of the lower classes, outside the respectable lifestyle of the middle class. Such a moral distinction was a way of turning the roles of “a suspicious parent” and “a respectable parent” upside down in Finnish and non-Finnish families. Thus, it may be interpreted as an attempt to redefine the (moral) standing of an individual family or an entire minority ethnic group, in a situation where the group is in an inferior position both economically and according to ethnic hierarchies (Espiritu 2001).

Discussion

Nordic countries are often regarded as role models when it comes to gender equality. However, good parenting still seems to be connected with a certain kind of nuclear family, carrying heteronormative ideas of partially complementary roles for mothers and fathers. While mothers and fathers alike are willing to present themselves as respectable parents, we claim that mothers face stricter expectations in order to fulfil the criteria for maintaining an orderly, physically and mentally “fit” way of life, which is considered crucial for bringing up children to become physically and mentally fit “decent citizens”. This is most clearly visible in the image of the single parent, who in our data was always a mother. The lack of a second parent – the father – was connected with assumptions about limitations in economic and social resources, and even in control over one's life.

Although these Other parents were talked about with understanding, a moral evaluation and distinction also emerged. In both datasets, the less respectable parents were located both among some “immigrant families” and among lower-class ethnic Finnish families.

Good parenting in our data is defined in remarkably similar ways. The parents representing both ethnic majority and minority backgrounds all draw upon middle-class, professional and familist discourses on assertive parenthood, characterized by the close scrutiny of one’s children’s activities and their friends, setting clear boundaries and having dialogical relationships with them as the preferred way of parenting (cf. Hoikkala 1993; Jokinen 2005). This means that the parents’ background and self-identification as middle class is more important in shaping the discourses on parenting than their objective socio-economic position. As shown above, organized activity was seen to accumulate into social, cultural and symbolic capital. The parents were, however, differently positioned with regard to how much practical effort had to be exerted and how many economic sacrifices had to be made in striving for these parenting practices. Due to the normalization of white, middle-class parenthood, the position of a respectable parent is harder to achieve for those financially less well-off or representing ethnic minorities, and easier for others to question.

The desire to present oneself as a respectable parent is not limited by the boundaries of class, ethnicity or gender. Such a desire is part of a more general tendency to interpret one’s own family in positive terms, drawing on the imagined and idealized conceptions of what makes a family (cf. Ribbens McCarthy 2012). Yet, what makes respectability a gendered, classed and ethnicized concept in this context is the way in which its content and its Others are defined: “problematic” parenthood is connected with those families who fail to meet the criteria of a white, middle-class nuclear family with two parents of opposite sex. We believe that it is of the utmost importance to understand the *moral* nature of these evaluations; and the mutually constitutive effects of gender, class and ethnicity (cf. Sayer 2005).

Two points should be noted concerning the framing of this study. Firstly, the data can be considered to be limited, as most of the parents interviewed were well resourced, if not socio-economically, then at least regarding their backgrounds and cultural capital. Secondly, because our focus was on parenthood, the active role of children and young people has not been examined here. Children and young people are by no means mere passive recipients of their parents' initiatives, but negotiate about the preferred forms of action and create distinctions of their own.

Our findings indicate that respectable parenthood, which forms a part of respectable citizenship, relates to morals: as well as certain physical qualities that make up what is required to be "fit", "mental fitness" – in the form of the right kind of moral values – was also crucial in forming respectable parenthood. These markets of inner order relate in our data to "inner" and "outer" fitness, which are thought to indicate respectability (cf. Berg 2010). The public categorizations guiding notions of decent citizenship, family life and parenting act as tools for positive resourcing for those who can regard them as material for positive distinctions. For those parents – and, consequently, for their children – whose family contexts are defined as suspicious or not respectable, the very same discourses and categorizations exclude them and limit their opportunities to represent themselves as decent citizens.

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² By ethnic origin, the families were Kurds, Somalis, Russians, Albanians, Kenyans and Arabs.

³ Unemployment, marginal positions and insecurity are more common among the population with an immigrant background than in the population as a whole (Forsander 2007).

⁴ For Bourdieu (1989), the process of classification is simultaneously (self-)reflexive and conditioned by the existing structures. While (relatively) established ways of classifying people and objects exist, these are produced in a historical and social process and shaped by each individual and collective classificatory act.

⁵ We relied on a self-reported evaluation of class positions.

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